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SUBJECT: EX-DEFENSE MINISTER OKRUASHVILI ATTACKS PRESIDENT  
SAAKSHVILI ON ABKHAZIA

¶1. On March 6, Georgian pro-opposition television station Kavkasia aired an interview with ex-Defense Minister of Georgia Irakli Okruashvili, leader of the opposition political party Movement for United Georgia. The interview was recorded in Paris, where Okruashvili is under home-arrest awaiting a French court hearing on his extradition to Georgia. Okruashvili, who became a strong personal adversary of President Saakashvili, is wanted in Tbilisi for money extortion, embezzlement, and money laundering.

¶2. Okruashvili criticized Georgia's opposition for failing to use to the maximum the momentum of recent protest rallies and stated his readiness to run in the coming parliamentary elections, unless barred by "certain circumstances" outside his control, during his hour-long and widely watched interview.

¶3. However, the main thrust of Okruashvili's comments, as expected, was against President Saakashvili. Okruashvili accused Saakashvili of being weak on the hot button issue of Abkhazia, stating that "Saakashvili has no plan, no understanding as to what he wants, and a strong fear of personal discomfort." Okruashvili recalled an episode when he and Saakashvili were discussing the operation to take back the Kodori Gorge during the summer of 2006, where Saakashvili allegedly refuted Okruashvili's suggestion to extend the operation as a result of fear of persecution by the UN war crimes tribunal. Okruashvili derisively claimed that Saakashvili "does not want to take the risk for reunification of the country." Okruashvili stressed that it is "impossible to reunite the country, including through possible military operations, and at the same time want to receive a Nobel Peace Prize." Okruashvili also criticized Saakashvili for not putting ex-President Shevardnadze on trial for all he has done to the Georgian people.

¶4. Okruashvili also responded to Saakashvili's earlier statement that Okruashvili was Saakashvili's "biggest mistake," noting agreement with that assessment. "Yes, I was Saakashvili's biggest mistake as I was not like others, ... I have created a huge discomfort for him, and I have actually destroyed him."

¶5. Comment: By ridiculing Saakashvili's ability to return Abkhazia, Okruashvili was aiming to undermine Saakashvili's most solemn pledges to reunite the country, make him look weak in the eyes of the Georgian public vis-à-vis the separatists and Russia, and blackmail him into taking tougher, potentially military actions against Abkhazia. End comment.